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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:
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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Wolf, P., Meissner, J. O., Nolan, T., Lemon, M., John, R., Baralou, E., Seemann, S. (2011). Methods for qualitative management research in the context of social systems thinking. *Historical Social Research*, 36(1), 7-17. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.36.2011.1.7-17>

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Methods for Qualitative Management Research in the Context of Social Systems Thinking

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Abstract: »Qualitative Methoden zur Managementforschung in sozialen Systemen«. The purpose of this article is to provide the reader with an introduction into the *FQS* special issue “Methods for qualitative management research in the context of social systems thinking”. While reviewing papers of this special issue, the editors recognized three thematic threads that seem to be of particular importance to qualitative management research from the stance of systems theory. The first of these themes relates to *observation*, i.e. the observable, in management research, the second to *methods and the design of studies* for application in empirical research using systems theory, and the third to the *implications* of those studies on what was studied, i.e. management in organizations. The positions of the authors of this Special Issue regarding these three themes are reflected and discussed in this article.

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Acknowledgments: The editors wish to thank Katja Mruck from *FQS* for her kind support while editing this special issue.
Revised Print Version of *FQS*-special issue: Wolf, Patricia; Meissner, Jens O.; Nolan, Terry; Lemon, Mark; John, René; Baralou, Evangelia & Seemann, Silke (2010). Methods for Qualitative Management Research in the Context of Social Systems Thinking [21 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 11(3), Art. 3, URL: <<http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs100334>>.

Keywords: social systems theory; qualitative research methods; management research.

1. Introduction

In this special issue the term “social systems” is derived chiefly from the theoretical starting point propounded by Niklas LUHMANN (1995). The issue is intended to raise the profile of his work in the wider English speaking research community. His work on organizations as autopoietic social systems has only recently and partly been made available in English (LUHMANN, 1995; SEIDL & BECKER, 2005). Although used by a broad but relatively exclusive German speaking scientific community (e.g. WIMMER, MEISSNER & WOLF, 2009; JOHN, 2005; RÜEGG-STÜRM, 2003; WETZEL, 2004; BAECKER, FUCHS, GUMBRECHT & SLOTERDIJK, 2010), the theory is only gradually being acknowledged developed, applied and critiqued in the English speaking research community.

This issue was originally published as a special issue in *Forum Qualitative Social Research* (WOLF, MEISSNER, NOLAN, LEMON, JOHN, BARALOU & SEEMANN, 2010). A very strong motivation for the composition of the special issue was the – from the perspective of qualitative management studies – under researched field of methods using a social systems approach. The most important driver for reprinting the special issue in *Historical Social Research* is the insight that social systems research can not be conducted without the knowledge about the historical development of a specific situation and the evolutionary dynamics of social systems (GERGEN, 2003). Socially constructed presence is only interpretable and understandable by knowing and reflecting on the development path of an organization, taking its stories and narrations into account (MEISSNER, WOLF & WIMMER, 2009). Thus, this issue contributes to extend the methodological understanding of historic social research with relation to organization and management studies.

This special edition draws from a range of theoretical standpoints such as, complexity science as applied in the management domain (WEBB, LETTICE & FAN, 2007; WEBB, 2009), social constructionism (GERGEN, 2003; BURR, 1995; RÜEGG-STÜRM, 2003; COOPER, 2005; REICHERTZ & ZIELKE, 2008) and the (re-)construction of organizations as distributed self-regulating knowledge systems (TSOUKAS, 1996; AHRNE & BRUNSSON, 2005). Other related streams reflecting a systemic understanding of organizations/institutions include GIDDENS’ structuration theory (1984), BOJE’s (2001) work on metaphors, narratives, and storytelling, LATOUR’s (1987) and WOOLGAR’s (1996) use of “actor-network theory” as well as MACKENZIE and WACZMAN’s (1999) focus on the social construction of technology.

A key underlying assumption for this special issue is our belief that the reluctance of the scientific community to apply LUHMANN’s social system

theory in management research boils down to *first* the relative difficulty readers face when trying to follow his writing and the complexity of the theoretical approach, and, *second* and more significantly, a missing methodological basis for conducting research grounded in LUHMANN's social system theory and related theoretical approaches. In particular this special issue comprises

- theoretical articles reviewing the broad landscape of existing qualitative research methods and developing an adequate methodological canon for research grounded in LUHMANN's social system theory and related theoretical approaches;
- empirical articles describing the application of specific qualitative research methods used in research projects grounded in LUHMANN's social system theory.

All articles present a discussion of the issues, questions and challenges related to the application of systemic research designs using qualitative methods in management studies, both in reference to theoretical approaches, as well as to the research practice. Authors demonstrate how management science can benefit from viewing organizations through a "systemic lens". Furthermore, attention is drawn to the limitations and constraints of using systems theory for the study of phenomena in organizations as social systems.

2. Observation, Research Designs and Implications

With one exception, the papers in this special issue focus upon the study of organizations through the lens of LUHMANN's social system theory (1995). The exception (MEISSNER & SPRENGER, 2010) explicitly expands on this theoretical perspective by complementing it with a social constructionist approach. Whilst conceding that the constructionist approach already shapes most of LUHMANN's thoughts (particularly in his later work), Jens MEISSNER and Martin SPRENGER (2010) consider it appropriate to de-construct these thoughts down to their constructionist base. In so doing they attempt to demonstrate how one is given clues on how to do empirical research, and on how to organize observations while acting oneself as an observer, and thus get insights into how observing in research contexts both enables and limits what a study can provide.

While reviewing papers of this special issue, we recognized three thematic threads that seem to be of particular importance to qualitative management research from the stance of systems theory. The first of these themes relates to *observation* in management research, the second to *methods and the design of studies* for application in empirical research using systems theory, and the third to the *implications* of those studies on what was studied, i.e. management in organizations. The themes are reflected and discussed by all authors, although with different intensity.

2.1 Observation

Applying a systems theory perspective to management and organizational studies implies that the focus of the analysis should be on systemic communication processes rather than on the single actions of individual actors. Gian-Claudio GENTILE (2010), in arguing the case for LUHMANN's systems theory as operative constructionism (LUHMANN, 1988), contends that meaning no longer resides in individuals' descriptions of "what happened" (first order observation) but into understanding how reality is constructed and maintained, i.e. how sense making patterns are processed between two or more actors in a way that systemic structures emerge and sustain (KNORR-CETINA, 1989; second order observation). The LUHMANNian management research approach, therefore, *compares distinctions* applied by members of the organizations studied. These distinctions serve to guide the perceptions of the researcher.

Contributors to this special issue are unified in acknowledging that the perspective of a systemic researcher is *situated and self-constructed* (MAYR & SIRI, 2010), thus impacting upon what researchers can observe and recognize about the phenomenon they study (TUCKERMANN & RÜEGG-STUERM, 2010; VON GRODDECK, 2010). Tina KEIDING (2010) even argues that observations may say more about the observer than about the situation itself and her paper reflects about how to minimize this impact. She states: "Observation is always participation". She draws our attention to LUHMANN's mandate for construction of the "other" when participating in and observing communication. In constructing the "other", the scholar is required to be present in interactions and, therefore, to participate in the interactions. In distinguishing between persons and human individuals LUHMANN insists that scholars observe others in a way which does not take first impressions for granted by seeking other descriptions and interpretations. VON GRODDECK (2010) describes observation practices as a *three-folded form* with a marked and an unmarked space (i.e. what is in the focus and what is not in the focus of the empirical investigation) and the distinction itself. Morten KNUDSEN (2010) suggests that researchers should analyze and reflect upon the distinctions that guide their observations so that research "can surprise itself".

Against this background, regarding the role of researchers as observers and the situatedness and constructedness of their perspectives on organizational phenomena, the discussion shifts to focus upon the reciprocity between the findings researchers bring about and the phenomena they are investigating. For instance, Harald TUCKERMANN and Johannes RÜEGG-STUERM (2010) suggest that management research is a *communicative social practice* where organizational practices become recursively interwoven with research practices, to include the involved actors in their contexts (see also KEIDING, 2010; KNUDSEN, 2010). They analyze how a "research system" emerges from relationships between the system of the researchers (for example a research pro-

ject) and the system of the researched (for example an organization) as a “third system”. This research system reproduces itself through relational episodes. Similarly, Patricia WOLF (2010) describes the *dynamic interactions* between these three systems which can have a strong impact on the research question and the research design. Harald TUCKERMANN and Johannes RÜEGGSTUERM (2010) conclude that LUHMANN’s social system theory (1995) provides a useful grounding for studying these recursive dynamics.

Authors also acknowledge the importance of conducting a careful analysis and reflection of their own position when applying this theoretical understanding. In all empirical studies, author-researchers position themselves *explicitly* as NOT belonging to the system(s) which they observe. The most interesting case in that sense is the article by Patricia WOLF (2010) who was employed as doctoral student by the organization she studied. As a member of the organization, she constructed her organizational role as an “autonomous observer” and portrayed herself as such to other organizational members. Armed with this self-awareness she herself felt obliged to write a project diary to help maintain a *reflective distance*, between her and the “normal” members of the system.

2.2 System Theoretic Research Designs and Methods

LUHMANN’s approach to methodological correctness is revealed in the article by Christina BESIO and Andrea PRONZINI (2010) as being deeply rooted in human-conscious systems and their evanescent nature – as existing only in the present as thoughts or perceptions. He further emphasizes the contingent nature of systems, of management and of decisions – each of which could be formed or done in a different way.

The research designs reported reflect the dynamic interactions between the systems under scrutiny. Often, research designs are adapted or amended during the research process to the extent that change is evolutionary in its nature (WOLF, 2010; MEISSNER & SPRENGER, 2010). Gathering data from multiple (sub system) perspectives provides an approach for accommodating the comparative nature of systems theory into the design of a study. The papers reflect a requirement for gathering data which represents the perspectives of actors from a variety of sub systems, such as organizational members from different departments and with different roles (LEMON, CRAIG & COOK, 2010; GENTILE, 2010; WOLF, 2010; MEISSNER & SPRENGER, 2010), from different institutions belonging to the educational system (schools, universities, institutions offering vocational training; see PEETZ, LOHR & HILBRICH, 2010) or different organizations active in the economic system of the society (MAYR & SIRI, 2010; VON GRODDECK, 2010; JOHN & RUECKERT-JOHN, 2010).

As social systems theory also implies, much data gathering is conducted through observing communication and decision chains. Cristina BESIO and

Andrea PRONZINI (2010) summarize extant studies outlining observations at different system levels. Other authors provide insights into research methods which offer different “sorts” of data: Gian-Claudio GENTILE (2010) studied *real-time communication* relating to construction of collective meanings about corporate volunteering during group discussions. Patricia WOLF’s (2010) research diary contained actors’ statements recorded *shortly after the statements* were made, having been selected according to subjective relevance structures. This rapid recording of data alleviates the possible problems arising from having to analyze material that has been reconstructed from memory. Other approaches to data gathering employ very open, i.e. narrative or problem centered, qualitative interviews on topics such as innovation management (MEISSNER & SPRENGER, 2010), unsuccessful management strategies (JOHN & RUECKERT-JOHN, 2010), strategy implementation (LEMON et al., 2010), transformation processes in education management (PEETZ, LOHR & HILBRICH, 2010) the (re)construction of management identity as a function (MAYR & SIRI, 2010).

A number of authors compare different methods for processing information within the social system they study. Several authors highlight the potential of functional analysis in allowing researchers to capture and visualize the distinctions which operate at the system level for classifying (management) problems and solutions (MAYR & SIRI, 2010; JOHN & RUECKERT-JOHN, 2010; KNUDSEN, 2010). Gian-Claudio GENTILE (2010) describes a documentary method of analyzing discussions in detail as content (what is said), structural (how collective sense making structures are processed) and inter-case level (what distinguishes sense making patterns between one case study and another). In addition authors report on how processes used for validating data *complement* and support the research data. Examples include feedback workshops with, or presentations to, former interviewees (GENTILE, 2010; JOHN & RUECKERT-JOHN, 2010; LEMON et al., 2010; WOLF, 2010) and the structural analysis conducted by former interviewees of the relationship of terms which they themselves had used (MEISSNER & SPRENGER, 2010). All authors of empirical papers confirm that triangulation methods for validating data were applied.

2.3 Implications of System Theoretic Research on Organizations

The implications arising from theoretical findings are rarely discussed here, with authors preferring to focus on the performance of the investigation of communication and decision patterns rather than any requirement to transform these patterns. This non-interventionist stance is legitimated by recognizing that science is itself a sub system of society (LUHMANN, 1995). Consequently, authors tend to formulate their findings and contributions at an abstract level, such as those insights provided by Thorsten PEETZ, Karin LOHR and

Romy HILBRICH (2010) into the increasing commoditization of education; by Katharina MAYR and Jasmin SIRI (2010) into the functional role of management in organizations, by Gian-Claudio GENTILE (2010) into collective patterns of sense making that impact the implementation of a corporate volunteering concept, by Patricia WOLF (2010) into the impact of the implementation of a knowledge management concept on organizational decision structures and by Jens MEISSNER and Martin SPRENGER (2010) into the design of an innovation process and dynamics of organizational renewal.

Although research findings from these studies were made available for organizational members to scrutinize, the aim of these feedback loops into the system was to validate findings and rather than to intervene. Consequently, authors acknowledge that findings of research projects might have a potential for irritation, for stimulating reflection and for providing orientation in a complex transformation process (JOHN & RUECKERT-JOHN, 2010; TUCKER-MANN & RÜEGG-STUERM, 2010; WOLF, 2010) Cristina BESIO and Andrea PRONZINI (2010) for example highlight that the second order observation would enable the researcher to question the functions of “taken for granted” systemic structures. System theoretic researchers however leave it to the organization to make use of their findings.

3. Conclusions

A key question arising out of this special edition of *FQS* is, how does Niklas LUHMANN’s theory impact upon methodology? We attempt to answer this question by dwelling on the subject-object dialectic as a characteristic of scholarly practice. LUHMANN also considers this dialectic to be of great significance, in his quest to discover the nature of the systems under examination. In so doing LUHMANN differentiates between adjoining systems by applying specific methodological rules appropriate to the system in question. For many scholars, having chosen to adopt Niklas LUHMANN’s methodology, the task may appear daunting. An easier route is to avoid his “trivia” and, instead, make an “opportunistic study of everything” (see KEIDING, 2010). For the scholar then, personal implications arise from the methodological choices he or she makes and will, in turn, affect the methodological process itself.

According to the authors of this special issue, one of the methodological key challenges for empirical scholars applying a system theoretic point of view in their management studies is that LUHMANN’s theory and perspective of systems forces them to engage with a fundamental, almost existential, dilemma: is what we think we observe really observable? Existential phenomenology, as we know, is a thoroughly constructionist social phenomena (CROTTY, 1998) by which, “meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” (BRYMAN & BELL, 2007, p.23). LUHMANN urges the scholar to look beyond meanings and interpretation in seeking further

levels of granularity in the data. As Katharina MAYR and Jasmin SIRI (2010) outline, LUHMANN's notion of management as a symbolizing construction plays with the falsity of considering management as an objective entity or as a sequence of actions. Instead management "exists" as an enabler for generating meaning among employees. As the articles in this special issue discuss, decision making is perhaps the central task of management, this action connecting and creating meanings both within the organization and between it and the outside world. Thus in a sense management is semantically constructed.

This constructionist notion has considerable implications for research. The mandate by system theory to study communication instead of actions or actors raises several challenges related to the researcher's position in relation to the studied organization as well as his or her research interest which determines what distinctions are made in observing. This constitutes a blind spot in which researchers operate. The system theoretic perspective demands that observing communications results in a sociological observation which sets aside ontological prerequisites about the social or about human beings. Such prerequisites are usually applied in quantitative studies. The articles in this special issue discuss how scholars can deal with this challenge through applying qualitative methods in their research designs. In general, qualitative methods appear as appropriate for system theoretic research because they enable researchers to observe the distinctions that are operative in social systems. One important insight is that triangulation of methods plays a crucial role because it supports the observation of communication processes from multiple perspectives.

As far as the explanatory power is concerned, we see that the findings of system theoretical studies have the potential to support practitioners/ managers in translating their own observations into distinctions relevant for their organization. Second order observation by researchers provides practitioners with an input that can potentially stimulate reflection as it visualizes how sense making patterns in organizations are created and constrained. For the organization and its members, this usually constitutes a blind spot. The strength of systems theory lies in the possibility to not only observe social practices but also to reconstruct the different systemic logics that determine the particular situation. As KLEIN (1994) explains, organizations display recursive symmetries between scale levels which tend to repeat a basic structure at several levels. Within organizations humans make decisions based upon patterns, seeing the world both visually and conceptually as a series of spot observations filling in the gaps from previous experience. Humans will rationalize decisions in whatever way is acceptable to the society or system to which they belong.

This rationalizing tendency holds equally for scholars as it does for managers. Hence in our attempts at observing management in organizations what do we see, an objective "other" or an extended perception of ourselves? It is potentially this question that causes the marginal interest of system theoretic researchers – at least as it concerns the authors of this special issue – in impact-

ing communication and decision processes of the organizations they study. Researches strongly focus on emphasizing the contingent nature of systems, of management and of decisions. The transformation of research results could however potentially be done by qualitative system theoretic researchers in a way that they would make sense to organizational members, as their studies provide researchers with the necessary canon of terms and expressions used in organizational communications. Most of the authors of this special issue therefore agree that it would be opportune if both practitioners and researchers would explore means, processes and limitations of such knowledge transformation further.

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